

Thursday, May 3, 2012

WASHINGTON – In anticipation of the summer monsoon season, U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman, Tom Udall and U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Luján are urging three federal agencies to commit resources to prevent catastrophic flooding in Santa Clara Pueblo that could occur as a result of the 2011 Las Conchas Wildfire.

In a letter to the Department of the Interior, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers the officials thanked the agencies for providing support in the aftermath of the Las Conchas Wildfire and asked them to quickly renew their efforts in order to protect the pueblo from this continued threat.

“Even a small rain event last summer led to intense flooding, the emergency evacuation of personnel in the canyon, the nearly complete destruction of the access road that runs up the canyon, and a Presidential Disaster Declaration,” they wrote. “A larger rain event would flood the pueblo itself, putting lives at risk, as well as hundreds of homes and the pueblo’s administration buildings.”

The Las Conchas Wild Fire stripped the Santa Clara Canyon of vegetation and hard-baked the soil, creating a dangerous funnel that routes surface water down the canyon toward the pueblo.

In the last 15 years, wildfires have burned more than 80 percent of the pueblo’s forest, resulting in the loss of natural resources, habitat and sacred sites.

The full text of the letter is below:

May 3, 2012

The Honorable Kenneth Salazar,
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable William Fugate
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Federal Center Plaza
500 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20472

The Honorable Jo Ellen Darcy
Assistant Secretary
Army (Civil Works)
108 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0108

Re: Addressing Potentially Catastrophic Flooding at the Santa Clara Pueblo

Dear Secretary Salazar, Administrator Fugate, and Assistant Secretary Darcy:

Thank you for the support that each of your agencies and departments have offered to the Santa Clara Pueblo in the wake of the Las Conchas Wild Fire in 2011. This was the most recent fire to devastate the Pueblo's lands. Combined with other wildfires in the last 15 years, more than 80% of the Pueblo's forest has burned, resulting in the loss of natural resources, habitat, and sacred sites.

To our great appreciation, the Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Federal Emergency Management Agency have all committed some resources to addressing the impact of this fire. Nonetheless, while recovery from this fire will take generations, there remains an immediate threat of catastrophic flooding that must be addressed. The fire stripped Santa Clara Canyon of vegetation and hard-baked the soil, creating a dangerous funnel, routing any surface

water down the canyon to the Pueblo. Even a small rain event last summer led to intense flooding, the emergency evacuation of personnel in the canyon, the nearly complete destruction of the access road that runs up the canyon, and a Presidential Disaster Declaration. A larger rain event would flood the Pueblo itself, putting lives at risk, as well as hundreds of homes and the Pueblo's administration buildings. Post-fire hydrology studies have confirmed that this is a real and immediate threat considering the imminent monsoonal rains.

We ask that you redouble your efforts and provide assistance in the very near term to put in place structures and plans that will protect the Pueblo before the onset of the monsoon season expected this summer. In particular, we believe that:

- the Flood Control and Coastal Emergencies (FCCE) Advance Measures program, authorized by 33 USC 701n and implemented by the Army Corps of Engineers, allows for the funding of flood control work in anticipation of post-fire related floods in northern New Mexico;
- the Bureau of Indian Affairs has the authority and should identify funds so that the Santa Clara Pueblo can engage in critical long-term planning for recovery from the fire and subsequent flooding; and
- funding for repair and renovation of water control structures in and out of the Santa Clara Canyon, which the Federal Emergency Management Agency has under review, should be provided as soon as possible so that work can begin immediately.

The Santa Clara Pueblo has a long road ahead, but with your support, the lives and property of the people can be protected, while the mission of restoring the canyon and forest can go on.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bingaman, United States Senator
Tom Udall, United States Senator
Ben Ray Luján, Member of Congress

#